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# The Hidden Agency of Women in Medieval Stories, from *Beowulf* to Guthlac's *Life*

## Matthew Gabriele and David M. Perry on the Literature of Europe's Bright Ages

December 8, 2021 By Matthew Gabriele and David M. Perry

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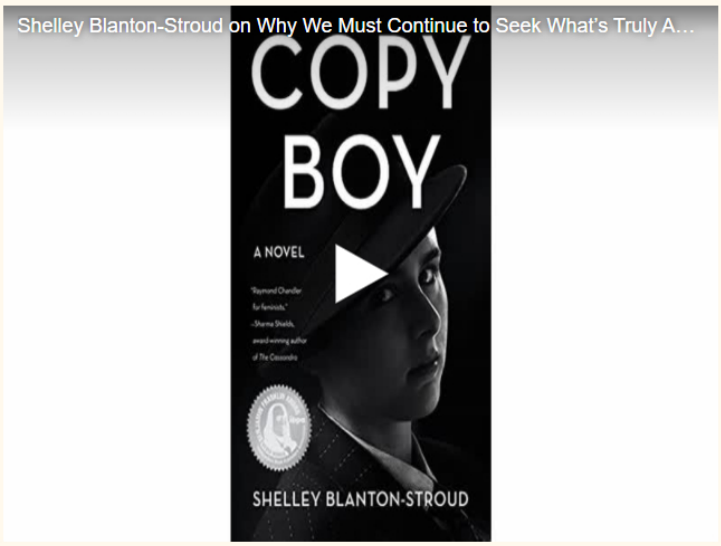
The story told by the Ruthwell Cross, a monument sitting outside what may have been either a small church or monastery in what's now Scotland, far from any center of power, incorporates men, women, and children, merchants from far away, peasants, and kings. This story of a multivalent culture can be found on giant artifacts, but it can also be found in books, especially *The Ecclesiastical History* of the English People by a monk named Bede, a man who lived and wrote in the northeast of what is now England, at the abbey of Monkwearmouth in the Kingdom of Northumbria, and the very same person who preserved the story of Pope Gregory in the slave market (which, of course, indicates his agenda in looking for a smooth history despite all the bumps in his reality).

Bede's story, like the monumental cross just ninety or so miles directly west of where he wrote, binds the lives of non-Christians and Christians alike, including priests, monks, and—as several scholars have argued, given the imagery on the Ruthwell Cross—likely nuns. But perhaps this shouldn't surprise us. We have spent a lot of time so far in major cities and their hinterlands, in Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, but urban centers and peripheries remained connected throughout the medieval period. Some of the most important stories, the most revealing moments, occurred not just in cities but in fields, or even in swamps.

But permeability brings not only opportunity, it also brings conflict and tension, and that, too, resides in the voices that come down to us from early medieval Britain. South from Northumbria, but at the same time as Bede and the construction of the Ruthwell Cross, in the fens between Mercia and East Anglia a man named Guthlac left his life as an aristocrat and warrior in the kingdom of Mercia to become a monk. His path was not easy. He started his career at the monastery of Repton but allegedly found it wanting and decided to become a hermit, emulating the desert saints we met above.

According to the *Life of Guthlac*, written by a monk named Felix just after Guthlac's death in 715, the hermit experienced similar trauma to his model Anthony of Egypt. Not only

(supposedly) was he carried off to the gates of Hell by demons and only rescued by the apostle St. Bartholomew, Guthlac was threatened physically by nonChristian peoples, wild beasts, and duplicitous fellow monks. But not all the danger came from the fens, the wilderness untouched by Christianity, as Guthlac and his biography moved between the high politics of two kingdoms.




Felix's text was itself dedicated to King Aelfwald of East Anglia (713–749), the kingdom in which Guthlac had his hermitage, and we read inside that he was visited by a future king of Mercia named Aethelbald (716–757). Indeed, when Aethelbald returns to pay his respects after Guthlac's death, the future ruler is treated to a vision of the hermit, now in Heaven, assuring Aethelbald that he will take the throne some day. Notice here that not only does the periphery connect to the centers of political power, but can in fact limit the center's options—the king decided not to drain the swamp but rather to harness its power.

Bede, telling his story about Gregory in the slave markets of Rome, was confident with the benefit of hindsight that Rome (and Christianity) would return to Britain, but Rome's emissaries when they arrived confronted an unruly world. Carved upon the Ruthwell Cross, runes mingle with Latin letters, Gospel verses are sung with the voice of anthropomorphic wood, vine scrolls intertwine with apostles, the whole program speaking to educated monks and nuns but also concerned with (from the church's perspective) an uneducated populace. And as Felix's tale about the hermit Guthlac shows, kingdoms and a network of Christian communities had been well established, but the countryside was full of danger, one where demons walked and commanded wild beasts, alongside pockets of threatening non-Christian peoples. In both cases, in both stories, power resides in unlikely places: "periphery," in other words, can readily become a new center.

Throughout the history of Britain across the early Middle Ages, we find this kind of patchwork of states and diverse peoples and beliefs. This was an inhabited land conquered with violence by the Romans under Julius Caesar, then (at least partially) Christianized first during the 4th century. More invaders came in the fifth and 6th centuries and the inhabitants fought or made accommodations with them, leading to the establishment of new kingdoms. Christianity (mostly) returned again in the 7th century, forcing even more political realignments.

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Only a generation or so before Galla Placidia moved effortlessly across the Mediterranean, in the early 5th century CE, and about the same time the Goths sacked the city of Rome, Emperor

Honorius (395–423) told the citizens of the province of Britannia that they were on their own. He had his own problems in Italy to deal with—no more troops would be coming to their aid. The Roman Britons nonetheless seem to have muddled through, sometimes independently, sometimes working out agreements with other newly arrived communities from the continent. It was an island forged by immigration, collaboration, and war and that continued into the post-Roman world. But as power devolved to the local level, the island seemed to splinter. Kings arose. Kingdoms fell. Wars raged.

This is, in part, the world represented in the famous Old English poem *Beowulf*. Although the only version of the text comes from an early 11th-century manuscript, its subject is of times past, a moment of movement throughout Scandinavia and across the North Sea that locates its center far from the Mediterranean. The story conforms to our stereotypical expectations of the medieval world writ large. There are kings and warriors, monsters, danger, and daring exploits. But like the rest of the Bright Ages, it also confounds those expectations. The poem seems to want to talk only about men—their triumphs and follies—but the anonymous poet is clear that women are the skeleton giving this society its shape.

After Beowulf defeats Grendel, the current Danish queen, Wealhtheow, approaches Beowulf the man. She praises him, thanks him for his victory, brings him rich treasures from her and her husband, but there's an odd note in her speech; she consistently mentions her sons. She worries about Beowulf's intentions, that his fame and glory will supplant her family's. Her speech is a shot across his bow, a warning to be grateful and go home—to be the children's guardian but nothing more—a warning that everyone in the hall understands, the poet makes clear.

That very night Grendel's mother appears, "grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge." She tears apart the Danes once more and leaves, taking her son's arm, a trophy taken by Beowulf in his fight and then mounted in the Danes' hall, with her. When Beowulf chases her back to her home, he finds Grendel's body laid out in the lair by a mother in mourning. But she will have no satisfaction in this life. When she's defeated, she finally reunites with her son. And this is a thread, a spine within the story, the power and powerlessness of women like Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother, who all share the same world.

Even in the other, more formal and ecclesiastical sources from the 8th century mentioned above, we pull back just a bit and see how these stories of men doing heroic deeds—fighting monsters in a swamp with swords or Psalms, for example—continually reveal the agency and authority of women. The triumphal carvings of the Ruthwell Cross are divided between holy men and holy women who move sacred history forward. Repton, the house at which Guthlac became a monk, was a double monastery of men and women, one founded with close ties to the Mercian royal family and led by an abbess.

Indeed, Guthlac maintained a close connection to the abbesses of Repton, writing to Abbess Ecgburh (daughter of King Aelfwald of East Anglia, to whom Guthlac's *Life* was dedicated) just before his death to request she send a lead coffin and burial shroud. The funeral itself was then performed by Guthlac's sister Pega. Guthlac learned to be a monk because he was trained by a woman and ensured his legacy by entrusting it to his spiritual superiors, two women. The "Dark Ages" imagines a world of violent men and subservient women, a world that conforms to stereotypes; the Bright Ages, attentive to the sources themselves and not our own preconceptions, finds something much more nuanced.

So then what would the story of early medieval Britain—of the early Middle Ages generally—be if it were told by pulling back these layers? The heroic narrative of this chapter that began with Gregory the Great sending missionaries off to the far north, with Guthlac braving the fens, with Beowulf conquering monsters, would be quite different. We must dissolve this nostalgia into air and see a more human, more diverse world beneath it.

We might tell the story of early queens in the southeast of Britain. Rather than ascribing the reconversion of Britain to Christianity to Roman bishops and local kings, we should pay more attention to Queen Bertha (d. ca. 606), the Christian daughter of a Merovingian Frankish king, who married the polytheistic King Aethelbert of Kent (589–616) on the condition she could keep her religion and bring her confessor-bishop with her across the Channel. It was she who

paved the way for Gregory's missionaries from Rome to arrive in 596–597 and likely pushed Aethelbert to convert and allow further proselytization. Bertha's son King Eadbald (616–640) was still a polytheist when he succeeded his father, though, and it took another marriage to another Frank—Queen Emma (d. 642)—to bring himself and the kingdom fully, and finally, to Christianity.

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We might also tell a different story of the Synod of Whitby in 664. This famous event, in which the king of Northumbria observed a debate over whether to follow Rome or the traditional Irish practice when it came to the date of Easter, was argued among men. The king judged, the abbot of the monastery of Ripon argued against the bishop of Northumbria, and other very important men consulted and conspired. But the event itself was held at the monastery of Whitby, under the care and gaze of Abbess Hilda (d. 680).

Converted to Christianity in 627 after her father married into the family of the same King Eadbald of Kent, she lived a primarily political life until her thirties. She then had to flee the north when her father fell in battle, but soon found refuge with her stepmother's family. She returned north only later, when she was appointed abbess in Hartlepool before helping found Whitby as a double monastery for monks and nuns in 657. Although she was on the losing side of the Easter debate, she remained so powerful and important that the Northumbrian king who ruled against her position at the synod was still buried in her monastery, and she seems to have been instrumental in getting her debate opponent, St. Wilfrid of York, removed from his bishopric shortly before her death in 680.

Not only do we find a more complicated situation when it comes to gender and power, we also find connections that stretch across continents. By the end of the 8th century, King Offa of Mercia (757–796) ordered a gold coin minted. In the middle, his artisans slapped the Latin words "Offa the king" (*Offa rex*). Around the edge of the same coin, though, we find a jumbled Arabic that seems to reflect the shahada, the basic profession of Islamic belief. This coin, perhaps despite our assumptions, doesn't say anything about Offa's religious commitments (the Arabic, for example, is upside down). Rather, they were clearly working from a model—specifically a gold dinar minted around 773–774 by the first Abbasid caliph al-Mansur (754–775).

But the coin's itinerary reveals even more about early medieval connections across vast regions and among diverse peoples. It was discovered in modernity in Rome, perhaps part of a tribute sent to the bishop of Rome, and so we can trace the ideas—and perhaps the gold itself, shining brightly in the light as it passed from hand to hand—from Baghdad to Britain to Rome.

Goods were not the only things to leave the island. Just as people and ideas from across the medieval world made their way to Britain, Britain reciprocated. Not long after Hadrian's death, the monks of Wearmouth-Jarrow produced a lavishly illustrated Bible so massive that it had to be carried by cart. Perhaps like Offa's dinar, the manuscript, known as the Codex Amiatinus, was intended for the bishop of Rome. Britain began to send missionaries back across the channel. Both men and women traveled to the continent, missionizing to polytheistic groups such as the Frisians. Another traveler, a monk named Alcuin, made his way to Rome on behalf of the king of Northumbria. But he never returned to the north, instead installing himself at the court of a foreign king named Charlemagne and leading his palace school. Even in early medieval Britain, a space often characterized as the most remote, the "darkest" of the "dark ages," they felt themselves a part of a much wider world.

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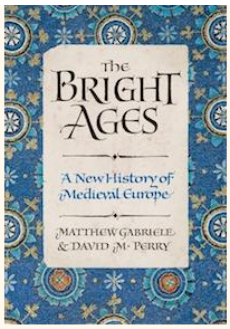


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Monica Dagna • 2 days ago

Interesting article. Just one problem: when you deal with Beowulf, Queen Welthow fears her sons might be betrayed by their uncle Hrothulf, that is why she sits her sons next to Beowlf at the banqueting hall and ironically says "your sons will be safe, sheltered in Hrothulf's gracious protection" but a few lines later she makes clear in her toast that Beowulf will protect her sons Hrethric and Hrothmund.

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